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Abstract

Like the fabled hare and tortoise, post-modernism and post-colonialism are running the same race, and if we take modernism to be the starting point, it looks very much like the road to nowhere. The hare and the tortoise are running against themselves, seldom against each other, and every step they take away from their modernist starting point is paradoxically a step back towards it. Along this 'tautologous and self-justifying circuit', they race, encouraged by the 'binary oppositions' with which they are conceived.¹

LUKE STRONGMAN

The Trans-Modern Author: Five Contemporary Writers

Writing has nothing to do with signifying, but with land-surveying and map-making, even of countries yet to come.

Deleuze & Guattari, *On The Line*.

Like the fabled hare and tortoise, post-modernism and post-colonialism are running the same race, and if we take modernism to be the starting point, it looks very much like the road to nowhere. The hare and the tortoise are running against themselves, seldom against each other, and every step they take away from their modernist starting point is paradoxically a step back towards it. Along this 'tautologous and self-justifying circuit', they race, encouraged by the 'binary oppositions' with which they are conceived.¹

When we look at the 'post-colonial' and the 'post-modern' we are looking at writing riddled with binary oppositions. Both concepts are fundamentally characterised by a move away from their historical antecedents, without which they would make no sense. The former is grounded in a concern with largely political, geographical, demographical, and ethnological influence on language and literature, and the latter in a more abstract, theoretical, and architectural understanding of cultural direction. The use of the terms 'post-modern' and 'post-colonial' in this article will be invoked with a critical stance, hence the adoption of the hyphen. The sense of the post-modern adopted here is largely that distinguished by Pauline Rosenau in *Post-modernism and the Social Sciences*. This is 'affirmative' as opposed to 'sceptical' post-modernism, although the use of the word is intended here in a general sense to invoke the movement in society, the humanities, and the social sciences, that comes after modernism, beginning in the post Second World War era. The use of 'post-colonial' is intended to mean simply after 'colonial', although this will necessarily include aspects of colonial development reflected in the contemporary historical constructions implicit within the writings examined herein. It will be argued that such terms are gradually losing their descriptive efficacy, that various of the writings they are employed to describe have moved beyond them in scope and meaning. 'Post-post-modernism' is a cumbersome label, however, and I would suggest calling the works it embraces

'trans-modern', as the issues and theoretical domain in which they are plotted is a 'coming through' an understanding and attempted transcendence of all significant aspects of modernity, 'early-', during, 'late-' and 'post'.²

The territorial gain once made by the British Empire has now diminished culturally and intellectually. This has been characterised as the reassertion of the former empire against its erstwhile coloniser. Such modernist advances from the 'periphery' of the former Empire are often, however, both parried and absorbed by the 'death of the author' in the Anglo-Western post-modern world and the fray of Eurocentric critique that it has engendered. This critique has encouraged the displacement of *authority* from the text at the very time when formerly colonised voices are seeking to express a renewed sense of cultural identity through such constructions and devices.

The ensuing cultural battle, while grounded in the very real issues of identity, social and political freedoms, and ethnographic stratifications, is largely fought in the realm of language and psyche. The canonical English texts are being replaced by writing from the colonies England once appropriated. These (post) colonial writings, writings from the 'Other', are now central to our understanding of the direction of English language and literature and inherently to our understanding of the changing cultures from which they are arising. All these writings have, in various ways, at their heart a preoccupation with identity, very often an amalgam of identities which the former Empire sought to assimilate and abrogate in the process of colonisation. More than this, however, these literary stratifications are becoming less and less meaningful as the system of 'binary oppositions' that characterises Anglo-American post-modernism begins to crumble under the weight of its own theoretical abstraction.

This criticism of Eurocentric bipolar analysis is largely in concord with Bhabha and Spivak and their refutation of a Manichean discourse structured on binary oppositions. As Bhabha puts it in 'The Commitment to Theory':

The language of critique is effective ... to the extent which it overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a space of 'translation'; a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object that is new, *neither the one nor the Other*, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the 'moment' of politics.³

This is the big picture, the cartographers' domain. Or as Frederic Jameson points out in 'Modernism and Imperialism':

... cartography is not the solution, but rather the problem, at least in its ideal epistemological form as social cognitive mapping on the global scale. The map; if there is to be one, must somehow emerge from the demands and constraints of the spatial perception of the individual...⁴

If we look more closely then, some of these 'post-colonial' / 'post-modern' works which are themselves representative of this process of cross-association and fragmentation among cultures and which are most vigorously, at times, expressed in a 'new nationalism', are strangely resistant to, while being representative of, this larger outside process. While they challenge narrative conventions, an essentially modern as well as post-modern characteristic, these works can be seen to advocate a re-centering, a return from the abyss of post-modernism to a new realm of textual stability. Writing from under the sigh of a lyricism they can neither expel nor wholly submit to, they demonstrate a pairing down of cultural archetypes fragmented by modernism and later disengaged by the paradoxical semiotics of the post-modern. Their lyricism is read as the expression of the individual ego of the author in combination with a 'musical' quality to the prose. The use of 'lyricism', here, is intended to mean the adoption of a particular style of discourse that carries a poetical inflection, or from which the reader retains a suggestion of a 'song' buried within the expression. Lyrical expression will usually be both subjective and emotive.

There is a general acceptance in many contemporary 'post-colonial' and 'post-modern' writers of the metaphysical of something like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. There is also a demonstration of a new maturity evident in the acceptance of the adage that 'just when things look darkest they go black' that is the scourge of the post-modern text. Inherent too is the glimmer of a way out of this void of the psyche and intellect. With a brief consideration of five contemporary writers: Walcott, Ondaatje, Manhire, Graham Swift, and Sealy, this article will largely concern itself with examining how this rebuilding is to be achieved, and what the implications are for both the post-colonial and the post-modern, the cultures which generate and apply these terminologies, and the cultures to which they are applied.

As Stephen Slemon has pointed out, 'like modernism, post-modernism needs its post-colonial others in order to face its narrative of referential fracture. But it also needs to exclude the cultural and political specificity of post-colonial representations in order to assimilate them to a rigorously Euro-American problematic.'⁵

In order to build a model of a re-constructed post-colonial literature, a re-emergence from the jungle of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, it will be necessary at times to take a cartographer's liberty with the political, cultural, and demographic crises that are sometimes inherent in these writings. This is not to forget that such crises are often at the heart of their writing and in a sense fuel their attempted reconstructions, but to acknowledge that they are the reason for their stories, and at the basis of their redeveloped mythologies.

Any grounds that are made in the process are not then to be interpreted as an attempted 'unravelling' of the cognitive and cultural 'aporia' of the Anglo-American West. They are not therefore a contribution to the self-

reflexive methodologies that these literatures are engaged in re-appropriating and reducing, but rather a re-negotiation for post-colonial power and the possibilities for the controlled exercise of the freedoms that come with such language-based awakenings.

Arguably, it is through such re-negotiations, that the ruptures, violations, and aporias of Anglo-American post-modernism may themselves rediscover a cultural base. It is through the recognition of 'Other' or 'alteria' identities and a re-honing of cultural archetypes and mythologies that the Anglo-American West may rediscover its own direction by swallowing the self-reflexive discomfitures of post-modernism, and through a process of reduction, re-assemble a generative authenticity in what it is gracious enough to grant to others. Spivak lays bare the skeleton of this problem in terms of her analysis of Foucault and Deleuze's 'Intellectuals in Power'. In 'Can the Subaltern Speak' she writes:

It is impossible for contemporary French intellectuals to imagine the kind of Power and Desire that would inhabit the unnamed of the Other of Europe. It is not only that everything they read, critical or uncritical, is caught within the production of that Other, supporting or critiquing the constitution of the Subject as Europe. It is also that, in the constitution of the Other of Europe, great care was taken to obliterate the textual ingredients with which a subject could cathect, could occupy (invest?) its itinerary - not only by ideological and scientific production, but also by the institution of the law.⁶

Spivak's analysis of eurocentric critical constructions of the 'Other' largely echoes Said's observations in *Orientalism*. To participate in the body of rhetoric that is Anglo-American post-modernism is to participate in the power-play in which the dominant Western culture attempts to come to terms with artistic, economic, and intellectual activity as a medium of social exchange. There is no way around this. As Said puts it in 'Representing the Colonised':

In short what is now before us nationally, and in full imperial panorama, is the deep, the profoundly perturbed and perturbing question of our relationship to others - other cultures, other states, other histories, other experiences, traditions, peoples, and destinies. The difficulty with the question is that there is no vantage outside the actuality of relationships between cultures, between unequal imperial and non-imperial powers, between different Others, a vantage that might allow one the epistemological privilege of somehow judging, evaluating, and interpreting free of the encumbering interests, emotions and engagements of the ongoing relationships themselves.⁷

Said's 'difficult question of vantage point' is basically that of the fundamental difficulty in obtaining any form of objective knowledge. This epistemological problem is by no means confined to the analysis of post-colonial cultures through language or ethnographical discourse. Post-modern methodological enquiry refutes the possibility of any such

knowledge and the subjective/objective dilemma and the inability of post-modern social science to work its way through this problem pervades the methodologies of many socially orientated disciplines. The paradoxes inherent in this debate emerge from real crises and these crises are variously reflected in the work of contemporary 'post-colonial' writers. By entering into this debate one does so not to participate in the processes of hegemony in which one dominant culture asserts itself over others which it perceives as subjugates, but in the attempt to make the claim that post-colonial writers are of major significance in the undermining of this hegemonic process. They are not so much engaged in a project of 'writing back' to the imperial centre but rather they presume their own 'centre' to be a starting point from which to reassemble renewed senses of both culture and author.

Writing from the periphery is, in fact, writing from the centre, or rather that notions of centre and periphery are becoming increasingly redundant. As Les Murray puts it: 'I figure the centre is everywhere. It goes with the discovery that the planet is round, not flat. Every point on a sphere is the centre.' Apparent fragmentations are in fact the architectures of a rebuilding; it is the emergence of new and re-honed cultural archetypes and mythologies. Following Said we need to undertake a development of 'nothing less than new objects of knowledge ... new theoretical models that upset or at the very least radically alter the prevailing paradigmatic norms'.⁹

Four of the five writers considered here, with the particular exception of Graham Swift, derive a sense of identity in the present through an assimilation of a hybridized past. The range is from Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, a post-colonial Caribbean re-writing of the Homeric Odyssey that underpins much of classical and modern literature, to Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, a novel which fuses the textualities of a classical past with the cultural fragmentations and multivocal 'rhizomal' mythologies, those patterns of cultural discourse that are emergent after the Second World War and that split away from the main canonical body and proffer reconstituted and reinterpreted genres at a literary tangent. This hybridized past referred to can often be interpreted as a hotch-potch of Anglo-Western values and the values which these writers in turn identify as characteristic of their 'other' cultural base. This essentially anthropological process, written through the language and literature, is on one level a process of ethnic stratification, the distribution of ethnic and political boundaries according to language and cultural expression.

The post-modern world has in numerous ways staked a claim towards embracing such many and varied stratifications, holding each 'successful' artwork as a candidate for appreciation within a global post-modern context. Marxist post-modern theoreticians may, however, interpret post-modernism as the predominantly Anglo-Western theoretical device of containing and controlling such newly established demographics, imposing

limits and drawing boundaries around these ethnic stratifications. It is possible, however, that these largely academic observations only function to add to the map, serving only 'parenthetically' as referents to demarcate those boundaries near at hand while revealing little of the territory within. There is much at stake, for as Shibutani & Kwan point out: '[T]hese movements create nations, determine the extension of language and laws, bring wealth to some areas and leave others neglected, and define roots of commerce.'¹⁰ A claim to language is a claim to power. Walcott, Ondaatje, Manhire and Sealy are all engaged in the process of reclaiming power among post-colonial cultures. This is achieved primarily through an ironic assimilation of the artistic freedoms offered by post-modernism, the rhetoric and philosophy of the Anglo-American West. Once this material has been assimilated these writers then proceed to breathe air back into the vacuum created by post-modern discourse through which they ostensibly write, thereby reclaiming a centre for themselves as the 'alteria' on the periphery of English language. As Manhire puts it in 'Milky Way Bar':

I live at the edge of the universe,
like everybody else. Sometimes I think
congratulations are in order...

I go down to the Twilight Arcade
and watch the Martian invaders
already appalled by our language
pointing at what they want.¹¹

The thawing of the cold war, the conversion of the world into a single economic system, ease of transportation facilitating contact among different peoples, the development of mass communication, the transformation of the civilised world into a 'potential universe of discourse', all of these have broken down the walls of provincialism.¹² Hitherto isolated and literal literary communities are again looking beyond their local horizons. The new Internationalism of a repressed and ethnically varied Europe and the newly invigorated African voices have adopted a magical realism with which to escape their 'national boundaries of the psyche'. These writings and those of their post-colonial contemporaries, are replete with variously renewed senses of often multifaceted national identities. Yet, as the writers look beyond their national horizons their collective gaze inevitably falls onto the theoretical discourses of a canonical and yet recalcitrant post-modern Europe, still engaged in the dogmatic hegemonies inherent in a system of authoritarian discourse.

As Alan Sealy has recently pointed out, such writers are already doing so with a renewed vigour and maturity, already in a sense 'post-post-modern', they have engaged with the rhetorical vacuum of the Anglo-American post-modern world with a renewed cry 'the emperor has no clothes, he has no clothes!'¹³

For the purposes of this 'post-colonial' literary model, it will be useful to include a European writer as a yardstick, a reference point against which to measure the validity of such claims as Sealy's advanced on behalf of 'post-colonial' writers. For this purpose, Graham Swift and in particular his most acclaimed and influential novel to date, *Waterland* will be seen as an appropriate candidate, an emperor who is perhaps bemoaning the loss of his clothes.

Along with Julian Barnes, Swift is seen as the most promising of the 'definitive' British post-modern authors. Writing retrospective fiction and often employing what David Higdon has termed the 'reluctant narrator', Swift is engaged in the lyrical amorphous and metaphorical analysis of European (predominantly British) entropy.¹⁴ Like Camus' *The Fall*, *Waterland* has an essentially circular structure, winding in ever decreasing emotional, historical, and inter-personal circles around both the British Fenlands and metaphorically around post-modern narratological theory. Swift shares the lyricism of the other four post-colonial writers but does so while employing an idiosyncratic mock Edwardian style, reminiscent of the solitary and enigmatic text of Fournier's *Le Grand Meulnes*. Analysis of Swift's novel reveals the intricacies of the entropy that is observed as being a strong feature of the European post-modern.

Swift is successful largely because he recognises this winding down and in the process of attempting to encapsulate it, confines a narratological sympathy that points to the responsibility that we as individuals and as members of society have towards the construction of our own histories.

Swift's cultural domain is the British Fenlands, its histories and inhabitants. He is engaged in the process of 'unravelling' the narratology of British post-modernism, the same process that will largely be regarded as indulgent and essentially redundant in the methodological enquiry of this thesis. Swift is engaged in a cartographic exercise of uncovering 'folly', the inversion of the very same process that Said advocates in the regeneration of a 'new' history in the Anglo-Irish context:

To the imagination of anti-imperialism, our space at home in the peripheries has been usurped and put to use by outsiders for their purpose. It is therefore necessary to seek out, to map, to invent, or to discover a third nature, which is not pristine and prehistorical but one that derives historically and abductively from the deprivations of the present. This impulse then is what we might call cartographic...¹⁵

Swift's cartographic mapping of the Fenlands is very much a personalised and microcosmic rendering of Said's proposal for the imagination of anti-imperialism. Swift's novel represents the imperialist hegemonic tendencies folding in on themselves, and, in the exploration of the personal histories and fate of his protagonists he explores and internalises what Said has termed 'anthropocentrism in alliance with Eurocentrism'.¹⁶

If we examine the various theoretical, anthropological, cultural, and literary polemics which are represented in the writings of Walcott,

Ondaatje, Manhire, Swift, and Sealy, we are left with a shared and renewed vision of literary development. Central to each writer is a notion that history and reality, writing and experience are not linear descriptions that can be defined in any particular spatio-temporal sense, but that they are socially amorphous phenomena, and ultimately to be regarded as being quite independent of the various politics of discourse that language takes as its unwitting prisoner. As Said notes writing on Orientalism:

In the system of knowledge about the Orient, the Orient is less a place than a topos, a set of references, a congeries of characteristics, that seems to have its origin in a quotation, or a fragment of a text, or a citation from someone's work on the Orient, or some bit of previous imagining, or an amalgam of all these.¹⁷

Likewise, knowledge about systems of identity and writings about such knowledge: culture and discourse. Each of these five writers is concerned with such powerful issues, but underlying all is a faith in and reaffirmation of the lyricism that both shapes and transcends them in the process of writing through them. We are left, like the children described in Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter*, who after school are watching the men being shaved. Like them, what we do is to 'applaud and whistle when each cut is finished. Place bets on whose face might be under the soap.'¹⁸

If Swift, by virtue chiefly of his British passport is guilty of what Bruce King calls 'presenting England as being enamoured of its own navel' he differs from the writers of the so-called new (British) Internationalism only in so far as he cannot share in their immigrant status.¹⁹

Swift's fourth and fifth novels, *Out Of This World* and *Ever After* are as much concerned with what might be called a new British nationalism from within, as writers like Naipaul, Rushdie, Mo, Ishiguro are from without. The cartographic impulse of *Waterland* endures, yet the net is thrown wider to encompass British immigrant experience of France and America. If the new Internationalists 'help map the post-colonial world by being part of more than one culture', an extremely loose and tenuous form of literary distinction, Swift functions as an 'insider' from within one culture upon which those same Internationalists are exercising their mapping.²⁰ This is partly why he is interesting.

However, this conception is at odds with King's assertion that 'many of the third world and Commonwealth books praised in the West are part of a nationalist cultural assertion that plays on our feelings of guilt about colonialism and racism'.²¹ To make such a claim is to take too simplistic a view of both post-colonialism and the conception of the mind that addresses it, blithely advancing as it does the continuing hegemonic tendencies of the post-modern Anglo-American theoretical power institutions. It is not necessarily the case that we feel guilt for the political and social ineptitudes of our ancestors, but that we now recognise their influences

to be both crumbling and mistaken, that we realise that they are the victims now of their own misuse and misunderstanding of the power plays inherent in language and discourse. This is part of a larger ongoing process of political flux buried within any exchange and mis-exchange of language and words within cultures.

Like Wilson Harris, Derek Walcott for the most part belongs to the body of earlier Commonwealth magical realists who are enamoured of the high seriousness of the modernist movement. His New Zealand equivalent is Ian Wedde. Both poets, are notable exponents of a nationalist cultural assertion. However, neither Ondaatje, Sealy, nor Manhire shares this pre-eminently modernist affinity, and their cultural assertions often seem to be as much universal as nationalistic.

Each of these three post-colonial writers shares a sense of Rushdie's 'comic nostalgia' and 'demystifying scepticism', each has 'the cosmopolitanism, the universalism' of Rushdie and an 'understanding of the development of uprootedness into stylistic innovation found in such exiles as Joyce and Nabokov', yet unlike Rushdie they do not champion this process, but rather write through it, undermining it.²² At the basis of their humour and lyricism is a fundamentally anti-post-modern essentialist concern with a re-honing of their various cultural archetypes and myths.

The Internationalists are caught up in the very process of their internationalism, whereas these three post-colonials while participating in it, puncture it. 'The possibilities of invigorating English brought by the selected adaptation of the writings of other cultures' that King identifies as a feature of the 'new British internationalism' is, in the light of selective post-colonial post-modern writers, revealed to be just that, an internationalism that is all-embracing in its cynicism and dogmatic adoption of the post-modern rhetorical stance, fruitful in analogy and cultural pin-pricking and explorations of a changing world of mass communication and transportation, but lacking in direction and the originating vigour of language and mythology.²³

The terminologies used to distinguish between and among many closely related literary works, such as post-colonialism, post-modernism, and new internationalism, are often themselves of little intrinsic value. To distinguish between Rushdie's *Haroun*, for example, and Ben Okri's *Famished Road* by virtue of 'new internationalism' and 'post-colonial' writing is to say very little. Both works are examples of what might usefully be called 'magical realism' but of major interest in such a hypothetical analysis would be to examine why both works employ the literary device of magical realism being written as they are from quite different cultural viewpoints, and with quite dissimilar sets of experiences brought to the processes of their conception and writing.

Making distinctions on the basis of categorisation is often a useful analytic tool, as has been amply demonstrated in the past with the writings of structural anthropologist Levi-Strauss and recently in the ethno-

graphical writings of James Clifford. However, making distinctions for the point of making distinctions is analysis misused, and often a dangerous trap for the literary critic who must venture into the social sciences and semiology in order to go beyond the text to make observations of the world at large.

Post-modernism has encouraged the proliferation of such distinction-driven discourse. Following Barthes and Foucault the 'death of the author' has forced the reader to look beyond the text for the various 'traces' it contains and is constructed from. Derrida and Davidson's analysis of metaphor invites us to hold up the written word, the 'science of the concrete' in the terminology of Levi-Strauss, as a candidate for appreciation within the wider contexts of usage for it to be said to impart any successful meaning to us. These theory-driven concerns make the analysis of language ever more complicated and crucial, and encourage writing itself to become evermore metafictional and intertextual.

Thus the more we use terms such as 'post-colonial' and 'post-modern' the less they seem to refer to anything in particular and the more they seem to blur into a species of writing that is making distinctions about distinctions about nothing. There is nothing conceptually 'new' in post-modernism, and although many post-modernists would like to deny any direct and linear links with a past, they are nevertheless bound to an established theoretical continuum that stretches back into modernism and beyond. As Levi-Strauss points out in *The Savage Mind*:

The proliferation of concepts, as in the case of technical language, goes with the more constant attention to properties of the world, with an interest that is more alert to the possible distinctions which can be introduced between them. This thirst for objective knowledge is one of the most neglected aspects of the thought of the people we call 'primitive'. Even if it is rarely directed towards facts of the same level as those which modern science is concerned, it implies comparable intellectual application and methods of observation. In both cases the universe is an object of thought at least as much as it a means of satisfying needs ... Every civilization tends to overestimate the objective orientation of its thought and this tendency is never absent.²⁴

There are no limits to theorizing but there are limits to what we can usefully theorize about before the process of theorizing takes over and becomes self-examining. This is the dilemma facing the post-modern text. The five writers examined here are aware of this dilemma but unlike Pynchon and DeLillo they are characteristically resistant to it. Post-modernism had its roots in architectural and cultural theory, it was appropriated into the theory of language and literature as a description of the collective qualities of a distinctive kind of discourse and appropriated in turn by novelists who are now at the cutting edge of exploring its conceptual possibilities. This edge has been reached and it overlooks the void into nowhere, back into the mind of man, back into the nihilism of

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, back into a modernism that forced a fragmented human to seek the obscurities of the intellect over the mythologies of ritual living. Walcott, Ondaatje, Manhire, Swift, and Sealy can all be seen as marking the footprints on a trail away from the solipsism of Anglo-Westernism and toward a new appreciation of cultural identity and civilization for the literature of the next millennium.

As Césaire puts it in his singular and powerful *Discourse On Colonialism*:

... I admit that it is a good thing to place different civilizations in contact with each other; that it is an excellent thing to blend different worlds; that whatever its own particular genius may be, a civilization that withdraws into itself atrophies; that for civilisations, exchange is oxygen; that the great good fortune of Europe is to have been a crossroads, and that because it was the locus of all ideas, the receptacle of all philosophies, the meeting place of all sentiments, it was the best centre for the redistribution of energy.... But then I ask the following question: has colonization really placed civilizations in contact? Or, if you prefer, of all the ways of establishing contact, was it the best?

I answer no.

And I say that between colonization and civilisation there is an infinite distance...²⁵

The 'infinite distance' that Césaire writes of in his discourse on colonialism is the measure with which these five writers are concerned. Be it the distance evoked in the echo of the waves that is the voice of Walcott's *Omeros*, or the warring winds and private breezes that fan the charred identity, the cultural fragmentations of Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, the galaxy of post-colonial 'conversations' in Manhire's poetry, the caustic searching 'breath' of Wedde's 'nationalistic' poetry, the amorphous silts of Graham Swift's *Waterland*, or the epic chronicled sweep of Sealy's *Trotternama*, what these writers share is the desire to break free from the relationship of coloniser and colonized, dominated and dominating, the destructive and destructing aporia of the binary oppositions of the canonical and alteria which prefigure much of Anglo-Western theory and discursive practice.

The model of post-colonial literature which can most readily come to terms with the works of these five writers is a model that does away with the atrophying 'balon d'essai' of binary oppositions and that avoids the signifying 'black-hole' of Eurocentric post-modernism. Through manipulation of history and lyricism, such a model writes from underneath a post-modernism that is grappling with 'word from the centre', and presents in its place a newly created mythology fuelled in turn and at source from the decreation of the old.

These five writers reflect a paradigm shift in literature and the arts that begins to be noticeable during the late 1960's and early 1970's and develops more fully during the 1980's. In literature this is now spelling a disengagement with post-modernism, or rather the works that many would like to label post-modern are demonstrating a resistance to such

terminology. It is not so much that, for example, Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* or Allan Sealy's *Trotternama* are not post-modern works but that the label which is brought to bear on them can no longer serve any really useful purpose. The descriptive efficacy of post-modernism was premised, however much it attempts to disassociate itself from a linear past, on its ability to unmake modernism. Modernism in turn was premised on its reaction against a claustrophobic Victorianism, meanings and movements, both born of binary oppositions. The paradigm that the novel has now entered is a stage either beyond post-modernism or 'out from underneath it' but not *following from it*.

To anticipate a 'post-post-modernism', however, would be to recapitulate the structure of binary oppositions and dichotomies, such as subjectivity and objectivity, truth and falsity, to which post-modernism is fundamentally opposed. The strength of contemporary 'post-colonial' literature lies in its ability to avoid what are sometimes seen as the necessary ironies of post-modernism while sharing in the textual and theoretical liberties that it affirms. As Ashcroft et al. put it in *The Empire Writes Back*:

In pushing the colonial world to the margins of experience the 'centre' pushed consciousness beyond the point at which monocentrism in all spheres of thought could be accepted without question. In other words the alienating process which initially served to relegate the post-colonial world to the 'margin' turned upon itself and acted to push that world through a kind of mental barrier into a position from which all experience could be viewed as uncentred, pluralistic, and multifarious. Marginality thus became an unprecedented source of creative energy.²⁶

However, such notions of centre and periphery, eurocentrism and marginality, configure less and less in contemporary post-colonial works. The five novelists and poets discussed herein engage fundamentally with the idea that the centre is everywhere. If marginality is seen as the unprecedented source of creative energy of post-colonial works within a post-modern world, then either these works demonstrate a conceptual resistance to post-modernism by the very nature of their apparently implicit and foundational oppositional construction of an 'alteria' and the notion of a bipolar discourse that this advances, or they do not inhabit an entirely post-modern domain.

Walcott, Ondaatje, Sealy, Manhire, and Swift locate their writing at a point on a global map in which all roads lead to 'home' even if these roads have not yet been charted. They invoke the textual liberties of post-modernism within a 'trans-modern' contextual domain. In this way the works of these authors can retain both 'post-colonialism' and a 'post-modernity' although these terms bear less and less descriptive weight, at least within the parameters suggested by the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*.

Marginality can no longer remain an unprecedented source of originality in an uncentred, pluralistic, and multifarious world; it can only contribute

to the bringing about of that world. The centre 'as everywhere' must then take over and become starting point of a road without beginning and end, which nevertheless always points homeward.

The works of the five writers are more usefully to be labelled 'trans-modern' in that implicit in each is a movement across, and an emergence out from, the structuring devices and reactions of a larger modernism in which post-modernism is variously seen to be implied.

The collusion of fact and fiction, myth and anti-myth, lyric and anti-lyric which the novels of these five writers invites us to address is a writing through of the aporia inherent in the various abilities of the texts to come to terms with the problems of modernism and the expression of the post-modern. It is not so much that we now look upon these works as examples of how 'the empire writes back to the Centre' to borrow Rushdie's phrase and to incite the post-colonial text by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, but that we see them as engaged upon the process of cultural re-assertion and integration from a multiplicity and equality of cultural 'centres'.

Further, however, strategies of return, answer, and rhetoric are increasingly disengaging in the topos of the post-colonial novel, as the history and notions of civilisations trapped in political Manicheisms, the binary oppositions that prefigure the Western mind, are left increasingly behind in the fray of post-modern multiplicity and the corresponding equality of voice that the post-modern must grant to all cultures. As Said puts it in *Culture and Imperialism*:

Gone are the binary oppositions dear to the nationalist and imperialist enterprise. Instead we begin to sense that old authority cannot simply be replaced by new authority, but that new alignments made across borders, types, nations, and essences are rapidly coming into view, and it is those new alignments that now provoke and challenge the fundamentally static notion of identity that has been the core of cultural thought during the era of imperialism.²⁷

Notions of centre and periphery are not as clear-cut as is generally recognised in contemporary post-colonial discourse. For every media inspired post-colonial multiplicity there is an evasive colonial ambiguity. For every (Eurocentrically) perceived binary opposition there is the inevitability of some degree of cultural collusion. For every simulacrus enactment of cultural multivocality there is a metaleptical repetitive sounding of the conch, and for every colonizing 'lion' there is a 'decolonizing' signifying monkey. The conch and the monkey are transformative and regenerative, they are the inhabitants of the new mythologies that emerge rhizomally, constructed from the fuel of the old, but they are also historical entities awoken anew. They are not so much post-modern multiplicities with the concomitant extreme relativism that this implies, as representative of 'trans-modern' multivocalities.

Walcott, Ondaatje, Manhire, Swift and Sealy are engaged in an act of narratological re-centring in their writing. Nevertheless, (dis)engaging of

elements of the post-modern, their work is to be understood as offering a degree of resistance to it. Swift's work largely points to the dangers of a culture in apathy, the atrophying 'siltation' of an empire crumbling under its own entropic hegemonics. For Swift the novel is salvaged from the brink of this aporia by its self-awareness and the desire to transcend the entropy of an increasingly eurocentric exclusivity by a kind of 'writing through', a celebration of the lyrical and historical from which the eurocentric hegemonic impulse was first and falsely expressed.

Walcott engages with an assailment of this entropy, the 'sounding of the conch' in *Omeros* a cry not for the recovery of an original force now lost in the Caribbean but for the recognition of a need for dignified collusion, a search for a re-centring of the selves within the fusion of multiple mythologies which make up the West-Indian identity of today.

Michael Ondaatje invites the reader to explore the fragmentations and aporias of the modern and post-modern worlds, the dissolving of misfigured canonical mythologies within the ruptures and violations of an Anglo-European culture largely understood as being at war with the idea of itself. In the process he explores colonial wounds, forgotten or overlooked histories, and develops an aesthetic program in *The Skin Of A Lion*, and *The English Patient*, from which new mythologies rhizome from the patterned disintegration of the old.

New Zealanders Bill Manhire and Ian Wedde respectively pursue the multiple complexities of post-colonial 'voice', conversations from the 'periphery', and nationalistic and complicated modernist essences in their poetry. Manhire challenges 'word from the centre' as cartographical exercise, plotting New Zealand English on a map that reveals it to be potentially as 'at home' with the poet in America as Trentham. Wedde champions a complicated sense of New Zealand English developing 'where it is'. Each poet undermines the sense of colonial past as authoritative 'culture'. Instead elements and associations of the demotic developing at provincial source are seen to vertically inflect their poetry, Europe now as much on the 'periphery' of discourse as its erstwhile colonies.

Alan Sealy writes in a counter-historical 'chronicle' genre. Dedicated to 'Those Other Anglo-Indians', his major work *Trotternama*, explores not the binary of coloniser and colonised that prefigure the writings of for example Walcott's Caribbean, but a kind of collusion between cultures that is seen to be particular to the Indian subcontinent. *Trotternama* and *Hero* address post-modernism in so far as they show it is configured as an 'historical product' and also how easily such largely Eurocentric notions of culture are buried within the vastness and evasive ambiguity of the Indian subcontinent and its Indian people.

If one certainty emerges from the fray of contemporary theory and discourse it is that binary oppositions as a conceptual tool are becoming increasingly ineffective to account for the relationships that prefigure the

contemporary text. If post-modernism is fundamentally characterised by an exploration of the ruptures and violations in the modernist text, the text that initially supposed there was to be found an essential meaning accessible to all, and latterly presupposed the ascendance of signification over meaning, reference over place, then this begins less to look like the literary world we now inhabit and more like history's phantasm. The texts themselves best reflect the position we are in. This reflection, as far as it refers to the eurocentric at all, is of an emperor who wears no clothes, or if we look more closely, of a breed of discourse that functions as a skin around the ageing scars inflicted by the unrealistic and damaging search for utopia that prefigured the Anglo-Western modern. To give Said the penultimate word:

There is considerable irony that our search in the metropolis for a newly invigorated, reclaimed tradition follows the exhaustion of modernism and is expressed variously as post-modernism or, ... as the loss of the legitimizing power of the narratives of Western emancipation and enlightenment; simultaneously, modernism is rediscovered in the formerly colonized, peripheral world, where resistance, the logic of daring, and various investigations of old-age tradition (*al-Turath*, in the Islamic world) together set the tone.²⁸

This 'tone' is one not of the 'post-modern' or the 'post-colonial' hitherto expounded and explored in Eurocentric critique, but rather that of a re-awakened sense of multiple 'centres', contrapuntal variations within cultural and literary discourse, and of the textual unravelling of patterns of collusion between cultures. Fundamentally though, it is to be characterised in the emergence of the 'trans-modern' author.

NOTES

1. J. Frow, 'What Was Postmodernism?' *Past The Last Post*. Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism. Adam, I & Tiffin, H (Ed) Univ. of (Calgary Press: Calgary, 1990), p. 141.
2. See also M. Williams, *Nations, Tribes, Selves: The novel since 1945* (forthcoming) for detailed discussion of the post-modern and post-colonial.
3. H. Bhabha, 'The Commitment to Theory', *New Formations* 5. 1988. No 5.
4. F. Jameson, 'Modernism and Imperialism'. *Nationalism Colonialism and Literature*. Field day (Univ. of Minnesota Press: Minnesota, 1990), p. 52
5. S. Slemon, 'Modernism's Last Post' *Past The Last Post*, ed. I. Adam, & H. Tiffin, (Calgary: Univ. of Calgary Press, 1990), p. 9
6. G. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Gary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 271.
7. E. Said, 'Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors', *Critical enquiry* 15, 2. 1989, p. 225.
8. I. Sharp, 'Interview with Les Murray', *Landfall* 166 (Christchurch: Caxton Press,

- June 1988), p. 160.
9. E. Said, quoted in B. Parry, 'Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse', *Oxford Literary Review* 9, 1-2, 1987, p. 27.
10. T. Shibutani, *Ethnic Stratification: a comparative approach* / by Tomotsu Shibutani and Kian M. Kwan (New York: MacMillan, 1965), p. 4.
11. B. Manhire, 'Milky Way Bar', *Milky Way Bar* (Wellington: Victoria University Press), p. 19.
12. E. Said, in B. Parry, 'Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse', *Oxford Literary Review* 9, 1-2, 1987, p. 27.
13. I.A. Sealy, 'The Four Banks of The River of Space, Wilson Harris', *Landfall* 184 (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1992), p. 481.
14. David L. Hidgon, "'Unconfessed Confessions": the Narrators of Julian Barnes and Graham Swift', *The British & Irish Novel since 1960*, ed. J. Acheson (London: McMillan, 1991), p. 144.
15. E. Said, 'Yeats and Decolonization', *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*. Field Day (Minnesota: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1990), p. 79.
16. E. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 98.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
18. M. Ondaatje, *Coming Through Slaughter*, p. 11.
19. B. King, 'The New Internationalism', *The British and Irish Novel Since 1960*, ed. J. Acheson (London: Mcmillan, 1991), p. 194.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 193.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 193.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 193.
24. C. Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*. Weidenfeld and Nicolson (Hertfordshire Garden City Press Ltd, 1966), p. 3.
25. A. Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. by Joan Pinkham (New York: M R, 1972), p. 11.
26. B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in post-colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 12.
27. E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), pp. 24-25.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.